

CHRISTMAS NUMBER OF LADY'S PICTORIAL 1890.



→ ELISABETH. ←

BY MRS. OLIPHANT. ILLUSTRATED BY A. FORESTIER.

CHAPTER I.

THE way in which we heard her curious story was a very natural one. We travelled a great deal in those days—my mother, my sisters, and myself. We were a tolerably large party, and travelled in the old-fashioned way with a man-servant—people called him a courier (but this was quite a false description; he was our respectable butler at home)—and two maids, not too much for four ladies. Travelling, altogether, was a very different thing then from now. I think it was much more agreeable, but I am an old-fashioned person. It had certainly this against it, or in its favor—that the number of travellers was much less than now. This was pleasant for us who were upon the road. But I allow, without hesitation, that a great many more people can now have the advantages of traveling—people with less time and less money than we had in those days. I am poorer myself with my small divided portion of the family income, and am very glad to go by the railway to some of my old haunts, and to do it without an attendant at all. But that did not seem possible in the old days. And when we had got over the long preliminary journey (which was certainly wearisome, when it involved long days of steady posting and steamboats

and sleet for the one, and very liberal and free in its arrangements for the other. The best people went there. We had all our sitting-rooms, and were not for ever bound to each other's company, but not when we liked. And as a matter of fact, the place had its *habitués* from year to year, and we almost all knew each other. An altogether new party, much more a new individual, would have felt, I fear, a good deal isolated—out of it, as the young people say. But we talked no slang in those days. The house was doubly the *Maison Blanc*—or I should say *blanche*, if I were grammatical, for it was very white, as much of it as could be seen for creepters: and Madame Blanc was the proprietor. She, good woman, was *Blanc*, but she was not *blanche*; on the contrary, she was ruddy and buxom, *belle femme*, which means, as everybody knows, in the language of her country, not a beautiful, but a fine, big, strong, imposing person, fit to rule over a large household. This she did in the most admirable way. Nothing could be better ordered or in more perfect discipline than the *Maison Blanc*. The servants were worthy women—trim, active, cheerful creatures—as clean and neat as possible. The greasy German waiter, with a smattering of every language and none of his own, or at least none that he can speak properly, was almost unknown in those days. You



"SAUNDERS WAS ALWAYS WITH US."

on rivers whenever we could secure that aid), and were fairly arrived in Italy or in Switzerland, the immense big travelling carriage—a sort of Noah's Ark—with a heap of luggage behind and room for everything inside, and a *banquette*, on which two of us generally travelled when there was much to see, was the happiest mode of progress. We lingered where we liked, and when we were in a hurry, added an additional pair of horses to the four which were our habitual team. The maids were a difficulty, but they travelled by the diligence, or had a little carriage of their own from place to place. Saunders was always with us, as a protection. He spoke a little French after a sort, but what was far more important, he was a big strong fellow, and postillions and coachmen managed to understand him somehow, even when his French failed, when he raised his huge fist and pointed out to them in forcible English what he wanted to have done.

Our Noah's Ark arrived one evening in this way, followed by the little carriage, in which Strong, my mother's maid, and Jane, who was ours, joined behind us, at one of the towns upon the Lake of Geneva, which is now given over to visitors of a less leisurely kind. The *Maison Blanc*, when we arrived, was not exactly an hotel, neither was it altogether a *pension*. It was very private

cannot go anywhere without stumbling over him now: he has improved even England itself. Some of Madame Blanc's women were from Berne, and wore their costume, which in those days was almost national—at least, it was still worn in some unsophisticated places: but, for my part, not being good at German, either then or at any subsequent period, I liked the Vaudois best. It is astonishing how much better you like people generally if you can understand what they say. We had, of course, ordered our rooms beforehand, and knew exactly which ones we were to have, the suite in the southward corner, which overlooked the lake. My mother always chose the most sunny set of rooms she could get, wherever she went.

We found some friends there as we expected, and we soon were full of engagements and amusements, and thought of very little, I fear, but how to get the greatest amount of enjoyment out of every day. But there was one little person whom we all remarked, in the house where we knew every servant intimately, as not having seen her before when we were there the previous year. She was not like any of the other women in the house; she was little and delicate, a pretty little figure, with a waist as small as Rose's, who was distin-



"OUR NOAH'S ARK ARRIVED ONE EVENING."

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guished for that, and what was still more remarkable, light hair and a complexion as fair as mine. That is not at all a common thing upon the Lake of Geneva. It made us all wonder; the little fair-haired girl we called her. We were told she was Madame Blanc's niece, and that she had been at school when we were there last year. My mother particularly was much taken up with this little fair Swiss girl. "She does not look in the least like a Swiss; she is as fair as one of you," my mother said. "She is exactly like an English girl. Madame Blanc's brother must have married an Englishwoman. Depend upon it that must be the explanation." We discussed the question a little, or rather we argued, with a running fire of objections, just for "fun," as we were all young, and to amuse my mother by making her argue it out. And then we forgot all about it, having our heads full of other things. But my mother naturally was less occupied, and she told us afterwards that she had been discussing the matter with Madame de Strontian and the Princess Dautsoff, who all agreed that the girl looked like an English girl, but raised various doubts. In the first place she was Elisabeth Blanc, which made it impossible that she could be the daughter of Madame Blanc's brother: and it could not be on the husband's side, for Madame de Strontian had heard Madame Blanc say, with thanks to heaven, that there were no parents on her husband's side. The Princess suggested that Madame was perhaps a Blanc by birth as well as marriage, but there was not much to be made of that, for nobody knew. In short, it was evident that while we had been enjoying ourselves in the garden, and in the salon over the piano, and with the usual little dance which we generally ended off with—for Louis Dautsoff had always young men friends about, and there was a party of Englishmen quite *comme il faut* at the Hotel des Alpes—these old ladies had been talking all the evening about Elisabeth. I do the same thing now with my old playfellows, while my nieces and nephews are amusing themselves in their way.

A day or two after this it rained a little, and I, by the greatest bad luck in the world, had caught a cold the day before, so that I could not go out with them. I mean the rest of them, on the expedition they had planned. To console me my mother got me a new Tschwitz novel, which was the next best thing, and made me lie down on the sofa covered with shawls, with a *fiancee* beside me, which I was supposed to sip at old moments. My mother had been so much abroad that she believed in *fiances*. I had drawn the screen half round the sofa to shield me from mamma's favorite sunshine, of which she could never have too much, when I heard—for I could not see—someone come in. Soon it became audible that it was Madame Blanc who had thus invaded our territory.

"I heard," she said, "that Madame had done us the honour to make inquiries about my little Elisabeth."

That was how she pronounced it, with a little emphasis upon the last syllable. She spoke on the whole very respectable English, slowly, but she never could manage the "th."

"Oh, dear, no," said my mother, shocked to think that anybody should conceive it possible that she should be a gossip. "We were only remarking how curious it was that her complexion should be so fair, and saying that she looked like an English girl."

"Many persons have made the same remark," said Madame Blanc. "If Madame will permit me I will tell her how it is. I do not speak of it on ordinary occasions, nor to common persons. Indeed, my rule is to be silent when remarks are made. But Madame is an old *protégée*, and has always been kind. If she will permit—"

"Sit down, Madame Blanc," said my mother, quickly, in the pleasure of hearing a story; for it was evident that there was something in it beyond what was known to the public. She had forgotten that I was there, and you may believe that I lay as still as possible, not moving an eyelash, scarcely venturing to breathe, lest she should remember, and send me away.

Madame Blanc, after a great many apologies, took a chair; and then she began a story which, as my mother heard it with cries of astonishment and excitement, was not, you may suppose, less interesting to me. It was such a story as one hears from time to time throughout the world. I have never been able to tell whether this is because it really happens, or because there is something pleasant to the mind somehow in such a horror and mystery. I have read of occurrences like it in books since then, but at that period I knew nothing of such stories either in books or life, and it made the hair stand erect on my head. It was of a lady who arrived suddenly with her supposed husband and maid one evening at the Maison Blanc; very young, and so far as could be perceived, beautiful. She was seen going upstairs with great fatigue to her rooms, covered so with cloaks and veils that this latter particular was, however, doubtful; and after a few days' seclusion she became very ill, and a baby was born. It appeared that she was very ill, so ill that for a few hours her life was despaired of, and the doctor did not leave the house night or day. Then she began to recover, and in less than a week, to the consternation of the household, the gentleman announced that they were going the next day—going to take her away, a delicate woman not half recovered. "It is as much as her life is worth," everybody said. When the doctor heard it he tore his hair. "You will kill her," he cried, to the gentleman. They had given no name, nor could all the efforts of the household discover anything beyond the Christian name, it was supposed, of the gentleman. It was Richard; Monsieur Richard was what he reluctantly allowed himself to be called. It was his *petit nom*, Madame Blanc was sure, not the name of his family.

"You will kill her," the doctor said.

"I hope not so," said Monsieur Richard, very stiff and calm, as Madame Blanc thought, but with apologies to my mother, whose amiable family were so animated and interesting that they could not be imagined to be English at all—the English generally were. "I hope not so," he said, "but anyhow I am obliged to take her away."

"You cannot be obliged to murder the poor young lady," cried the doctor, "for that is what it will be; indeed, I could have you stopped by the magistrates, for it is an attempt against human life."

The gentleman was very angry, but he made an effort, and restrained himself.

"I assure you," he said, "it is a question of life or death anyhow. I cannot help it. Tell me what I can do to lessen the risk. Anything I can do in that way I will do, but go we must."

The doctor seized the hair of his head with both hands and tore it, crying, "*Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!*" till Madame Blanc thought he would go out of his senses; but, having relieved himself so, set to work and directed her how to put a mattress into a carriage and arrange everything that was possible for the comfort of the unfortunate lady. "You will repent it all your life," he said. "I wash my hands of it; I will take no responsibility. Before you go you must sign something to say I warned you, that it was no fault of mine," but all the while he was scribbling with his pencil a rough sketch of the carriage to show how the thing was to be done.

But the wonderful part of the story was yet to come. Next morning the lady herself, whom nobody had seen but the doctor, for the first time requested to see Madame Blanc, who found her in her room dressed, but extended upon the sofa, and looking more like death than life. Our landlady gave my mother all the story—every word that the poor young lady said, and all that she said, which is much too long for me to put down, even if I remembered it perfectly. But the conclusion was this, and it made my hair stand on end upon my head, though I could not imagine for what entire so inhuman a thing could be done. It was that the baby, the poor little infant a week old, was to be left behind.

"With the first proposition I had nearly fainted," Madame Blanc said, and

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my mother agreed that it was not wonderful. The discussion was long, and Madame Blanc's remonstrances were many; but the end of the whole matter was that the baby was left abandoned of her parents, without anything but the new little baby-clothes, which had not a mark upon them, not a lock, not a letter, nothing that could serve the purpose of identifying her hereafter. Madame Blanc declared that she had never been able to explain to herself how she had entered into such a bargain. But the poor lady was very pretty, not much more than a child herself, and very miserable, and cried so that it was not in flesh and blood to resist her. And thus the arrangement was not without advantages. There was an allowance to be made through a respectable lawyer in the nearest town, and every guarantee given to him. If the child lived and grew up, full provision would be made for it hereafter. In short, all was satisfactory except the fact itself that was the centre of all.

Madame Blanc declared to my mother—and to me, listening in secret, and so much horrified and interested that I entirely forgot I had no right to be there—that when the carriage drove away, with the poor young lady lying on the mistress and the blinde down, and she found herself standing on her own threshold with the deserted baby in her arms, it seemed to her as if she was in a dream. But it was no dream, for there was the poor little child with its eyes open staring up at her; the poor little deserted baby, cast off by those whom it belonged to, before it had been a week in the world.

This was how the little maid in the *penon* had a round, fair English face, and the composed manner of an English girl. She had been there all her life, among a loud-speaking, gesticulating, dark-browed race, and she had got no more of their manners than of their dark hair. She had learned a little English at school of the most limited kind, but English was written across all of her little modest ways. She was not made to do anything that involved hard work. To carry up a jug of hot water, to answer in her soft voice any nervous lady's call, was all that Elisabeth was employed upon. And she did not at all know what it was that made her so different to the others. She had heard it said of her that she was like an English girl, and she had only smiled the quiet little smile which was so different from the demonstrations of Ernestine and Leonie.

"Has she no idea at all of the truth?" my mother said.

"I think not one," said Madame Blanc; "how could the poor little thing? The story was known at the time; it could not be hid. It is known of course now to M. Jaquet, the notary, who has always paid the money every quarter-day as punctually as possible. He has his directions what to do when Elisabeth marries. But most of the people have forgotten the story. In eighteen years so many things happen—the population changes. Madame may figure to herself that this is a very stationary place, but if I was only to recount the alterations—. In the village there is a new blacksmith, who has only been here about two years, and never has learned to shoe my old mare in the right way; and the dressmaker is new; and there is a different person in the barber's shop every year; there is another schoolmaster; the pastor is the son of our old pastor. All this since eighteen years!"

"It is the way of the world," said my mother, with a sigh, "even in the most secluded corner. It is a most interesting story. And have there been no inquiries, no visit, no letter? How wonderful that any woman could abandon her little infant so."

"Ah, Madame, it was not the fault of that poor little mother. Her heart was broken. It was not her, it was the gentleman, the dreadful man. One thing I am sure of, he was not the baby's father. I have my own little theory. She was so young—little more than a child, not older than my Elisabeth. If she was a victim, if she had made a fault, how can I tell? But Monsieur Richard was a brother, who brought her away to hide her shame—that is my idea; it may be all wrong. And I think I have seen that gentleman once more, but it was in the street of Yevay, it was not near this place. He must have seen me, for his eye was like a needle, so keen. When he saw that I followed him he walked and walked till he nearly killed me. The English have that faculty of walking. I went after him up one street and down another, till I thought I should have died. And at last, when I was so worn out that I could not see what was before me, he disappeared, and I saw him no more."

"I am very much obliged to you for telling me such a wonderful story," said my mother. "Do you mean it to be quite confidential, Madame Blanc, or may I say a word in private to my friend Madame de Strontian and the dear Princess? They both take a great interest—and we have been already talking on the subject. I have your consent! Ah, thank you! it will be so much easier now. And tell me, if she marries, you will have to make it all known?"

Madame Blanc shook her head and said that she hoped it might not be so. Her brother George had died in England. He had left a little girl. Madame George was an English woman, who had never come to her husband's home, nor wished to come. So to what use to enter into long explanations? "I myself think she is the daughter of George. I say to her sometimes, 'Thank Heaven they are not resembling to thy mother!' And if even I thus deceive myself, why should not the rest of the world?"

When Madame Blanc left the room, my mother sat quite still thinking it over for some time, making an occasional little noise, "thick, thick," as one does when one is in perplexity; and then she got up and began to move about the room. When it suddenly occurred to her to pull aside the screen, and she saw me on my sofa, looking up much alarmed, and not knowing what might happen next, I think you might have knocked her down with a stick.

"You there, child!" she cried out, with horror in her voice.

"Yes, mamma," I said, very humbly. It was only then it occurred to me what a dreadful thing I had done.

"Have you been there all the time? Have you heard all Madame Blanc's story? Oh, child, child!" my mother cried.

"You forget," said I in self-defence, "that I have been here all the afternoon; and how was I to know that Madame Blanc had anything particular to say? I and then, if I had gone out in the middle of it, what a fright I should have given you. I really do not think that it was my fault."

My mother walked up and down the room a little, as she had a way of doing when she was disturbed in her mind, and then she said:

"My dear, you have burdened your memory quite unnecessarily with a dreadful story. Perhaps there may turn out to be more to come; but, at all events, it is bad enough as it is. Now, do you think you can manage to dismiss it altogether from your mind and think of it no more?"

"No, mamma," I said, "I don't think I can do that."

"Well, Louisa," said my mother, "it is not my fault, it is your own doing to thrust yourself into hearing it. Your mind will now be burdened for ever with a thing you must never breathe to a living soul. I cannot ask you to forget it, but I must ask you to behave yourself as if you had never heard a word. You must never whisper a word about it to anyone, and never look as if you knew."

"Oh, mamma," I cried, in consternation.

"There is no other way that is consistent with honour," my mother said. "Think of that! going about as long as you lived with a secret in your mind which you dare not tell to anyone! And that not from any fault of your own, but because you happened to be lying with a cold on a sofa when the revelation came!"

I NEVER knew how I managed to get through that day and the next with the secret in my mind. I clung to it, locking it up in my heart, sealing my lips, feeling every moment as if something would burst out against my will. But at the end of the second day, when I had fully realised the horror of going through life thus with something in my mind that was never to be mentioned, yet could never be forgotten, something that interfered with my thoughts and mixed itself with everything I was doing, a little gleam of relief came. Those two days seemed as long as a year to me. I felt inclined at every moment to cry out, "Oh, but that is not such a story as Elisabeth's!" or, "Oh, that is just like Elisabeth!" I never read anything or heard any of old Madame Malin's tales (who was the Dantsicoffs' governess, and made up of stories) without this comparison, and without a something of pride in my heart, instantly crushed by the sense that I must not, dare not, say a word; to think that I could tell, if I pleased, something more wonderful, more exciting, than anything she knew. But on the second day I began to feel round me an atmosphere which was not so severe as before. I saw the old ladies talking together in the corner, and I perceived that they all eyed Elisabeth, and made little pointed speeches to her and called her "ma chérie," and "ma pauvre petite," when they spoke to her. It lightened my burden a little when I perceived that mamma had communicated it to someone, as Madame Blanc had given her leave to do, but this after all did not make it much easier for me, for it was not the old ladies but the young ones that I was tempted to make my confession to. But when Frances came in that second night and found me all bundled up in a corner of the balcony, which

indeed was not at all an ill fate, for the balcony looked over the lake, all flushed with the ending of the day, and the sky was full of lovely little clouds pink with sunset, reflected in the water, and the hills of Savoy over about Evian stood up like dark giants, with those clouds like floating

roseleaves suspended over their dark heads; and on the lake was here and there a boat, that seemed to hang between the declining evening sky and the glistening ripples of the lake. It was not at all an evil fate to sit there and hear the voices and songs and tinkle of the oars, and the lapping of the water on the little beach, just beyond our garden wall; but then I was generally in the very midst of the commotion downstairs, either singing, or laughing, or dancing, or making a noise in some way, and enjoying myself with all my heart. When Frances, however, came out and found me there, I saw in a moment that there was something more than usual in her look.

"Oh, Louisa!" she said, "did you really, really hear Madame Blanc tell all that wonderful story about Elisabeth to mamma?"

What a relief it was! I should not then after all be obliged to carry a secret with me to my grave! It did not trouble me at all after this that Rose had not been told. She was such a thoughtless little thing, she would never have cared. There were many things even concerning the family that she never knew;

"WITH THE DESERTED BABY IN HER ARMS."

she had no curiosity. If you told her, either she did not listen to you, or she forgot next moment what you had told her, and knew nothing whatever about it next day; but the delight of feeling that I could talk freely to Frances was a feeling which I could not express. She said she was not sure that mamma had been wise in telling it to Madame de Strontian and the Princess.

"It would have been better," said Frances, "to keep it to ourselves; for the Princess has very little discretion, and Madame de Strontian is so deaf that you have to shout everything at her, and somebody else is sure to hear."

As a matter of fact, however, though we talked of it a great deal among ourselves, and it drew the three families who were at the Maison Blanc more and more closely together, it never did creep out, though I am sure I could read in the eyes of the Princess's maid, old Agathe, that she knew it as well as I did. But she was a great friend of Madame Blanc, and probably she had known it before.

I took a great interest in Elisabeth after this, and never lost an opportunity to talk to her when I had the occasion. She was a pretty little thing in her soft way, so quiet among all the noisy people that she looked passive, and sometimes almost sad; or perhaps it was only my knowledge of her story that made me think so. She told me about her school which she had lately left, and where she had been very happy.

"The only thing I did not like," she said, "was that I never could have time to study my English; and I wanted above all things to learn my English, for perhaps mademoiselle does not know—my mother was English; and everybody says I am such a *petite Anglaise* in all my ways."

"Yes, Elisabeth," said I; "you are very like an English girl."

"Mademoiselle sees it too!" she said, with a brightening face. "But I cannot speak it, only a few words. I read a little every day, a little in my English Bible, and that keeps me to my country."

"But, Elisabeth," said I, very anxious not to betray what I knew, "you must remember that Switzerland is your father's country, and all your kind relations are here. Madame Blanc, who is so fond of you—"

"Oh, yes," she said; "Aunt Theodora is very kind. I love them all very



much. I love old Bonne Maman, my papa's mother; but he died in England, poor papa; he is buried there; some day, if I may, I will get my husband to take me to England to visit his grave."

"And your mother, Elisabeth?" said I.

"I have not been told, mademoiselle. I do not think that they know much. She must have died when I was born; and as all their thoughts were with papa—as perhaps was natural—they can tell me only a little about her. It is said to have neither a father nor a mother, mademoiselle."

"Oh, very sad," said I. "I have no father, Elisabeth."

"That is why mademoiselle is so kind to me. But then you have your mother—as good, so kind—to tell everything to. Yes, yes; I am like that with Aunt Theodosie. I tell her most things, but not perhaps all. I tell all to Bonne Maman," the girl added, with a smile, "but she is a little deaf, and she does not hear all that I say."

We both of us laughed a little at this, for there was something funny in the idea of telling everything to the old deaf woman because she could not hear. It was rather tedious too, when one came to think of it, and perhaps that was why Elisabeth got very grave again, and said, with a little sigh, "If I could but speak English, I should be quite happy."

"If you will come to me after the déjeuner, before we go out, I will give you a lesson in English, Elisabeth, every day."

"Oh, mademoiselle! And will you be so heavenly kind!" cried little Elisabeth, with tears in her eyes.

This was how it was that we became such friends. She used to come to me every day, and we talked English, which, it seemed to me in my ignorance, was the best way. Elisabeth's was very bad English indeed at first, but she improved very quickly, as I corrected every wrong word she used with the most unflinching severity. She told me all that had ever happened to her (so far as she knew), and all that was likely

"Ah, but we are not in England," cried Elisabeth, shaking her head. "They think it is not modest here to what you call love. In England a girl is not made to marry if she hates it very much. But here, Oh that is why I cannot bear it because I am English. I don't want to marry any man. I would rather stay at home and do the work of Leocadie. But Aunt Theodosie will not permit that. I would rather slip into the lake, and it would all be over, and no harm. But I do not speak of this. It is Aunt Theodosie, mademoiselle. She is in great haste to have me married, more than Aunt Adèle is about Wilhelmina; more than any one I know; and I who among all the young girls am the one that hate it most."

"What is it that you hate so much, Elisabeth?" said my mother, who was passing through my room to her own.

"It is being married, mamma. She says her aunt insists upon marrying her, and she cannot bear it; and I tell her that in England it is a sin to make any girl marry unless she loves the man."

"It is a sin that is very often committed," said my mother in a tone quite different from her usual voice, "and you must not talk nonsense to Elisabeth about England, for, though her mother was English, this is the country she belongs to; and, my dear, you must not mind what my daughter says. Believe me that your aunt is doing exactly what is best for you. She is very anxious to do everything for you for the best."

Elisabeth dried her eyes, and tried to smile.

"If she would not insist that I should marry; if she would let me do the work of Leocadie! Oh, madama, she would listen to you, if you were to speak?"

"Don't put nonsense into her head," said my mother

to me sharply; and then she said to Elisabeth, in a softened tone, "I have spoken to your aunt, and I quite approve what she is doing, and so will you when you are older, and can understand."

That evening I had an interview with mamma, which was not pleasant. She was more angry with me than I can say.

"I must put a stop to these lessons altogether if you teach her nonsensical ways of thinking. She may be English by origin, poor thing, but who has she to take care of her? There would not be one creature whom she could depend on if Madame Blanc were to die. Suppose she had no refuge, no protection, and perhaps some dreadful person rising up to tell her the story of her birth, what poor Madame Blanc is gone. It would probably kill her, a delicate girl like that."

"But, mamma!" I cried—

"Oh, do not bring up any hate to me," said my mother. "You must not interfere with Madame Blanc. What she is trying to do for Elisabeth is the very best she can do, to get her settled and give her a real position, and a name to which she has a right."

I was both angry and grieved with my mother for talking so. I disapproved of her to the bottom of my heart. What could I do better than keep Elisabeth from the sin of one of those horrid French marriages? However, I had the habit of doing what mamma told me in those days, and I did not want our lessons to be interfered with, so that I took a great deal of trouble to ward off all dangerous subjects, and never to refer to marriage, which was the most dangerous of all.

Madame Blanc soon found, however, that Elisabeth was a very difficult little person to please. I do not know how many candidates for her little hand (and *dot*) were *renvoies* before she would consent at all to listen to her aunt's proposal. The man who received at last her unwilling consent—or assent, for it did not go any further—was young Mr. Jaquet, the son of the notaire. Madame Blanc came upstairs again, and had another long colloquy with my mother before this arrangement was concluded. Unfortunately my cold was well before that time, and I had no chance of being present and hearing what they said. Mamma told us, however, when we insisted on hearing, Frances and I, that Madame Blanc was very much pleased with this last suitor.

"His father knows all about Elisabeth; more than anyone does. It is he to whom her money is paid, and he of course will know also where the *dot* comes from. Whereas to any other it would have been necessary to make explanations and to pass Elisabeth off as the daughter of Madame's brother George. Now the first Madame George, the brother's wife, is still alive in England with her girl, so that if anything should reach her ears about Elisabeth she would probably make a great commotion, and think she was being cheated of her child's inheritance. It is an excellent thing that it is young Jaquet," said my mother.

We were as much interested as if we had something to do with the concealment and the expediency of getting Elisabeth married out of harm's way. She commenced the fact to me next day.

"But he is young and he is *nice*," said I. "Surely you must be a little satisfied now."

She shook her head as she sat over her work.

"If it must be someone it may as well be he," she said; "he is better than the master of the school; he is superior to old M. Tenot at the post-office. At least he is young, and we have played together when we were children. As well he as another. Let us talk about something that is more pleasant, dear Mademoiselle." Elisabeth relieved her heart with a sigh; she gave me a pathetic little smile. "It is better, perhaps, to know what is the worst that can happen to you," she said.

"Oh, Elisabeth, he is very nice; he is good-looking; he is not too old. I think you will be very happy," cried I.

"Perhaps, Mademoiselle, I may die before it happens; or perhaps he may die, or something may come in the way. There is always the lake at the bottom of the garden," she said, with a little dreary smile. "Therefore, please, let us talk of something that is more gay."

I did not pay any attention to what she said about the lake. People talk like that in Switzerland; but of course that is not how a girl should talk of her marriage. It made me very unhappy, but after the first Elisabeth did not seem unhappy; she made up her mind to it. M. Jaquet, the younger came over from Yevay from time to time by way of making himself agreeable, and the marriage day was fixed for the 10th of August, a few days before the time fixed for our going away. It was settled so in order that we might be present at the marriage, and see dear little Elisabeth through that trial. My mother was very strong on the subject, on the excellent arrangement it was, and what a good thing for worthy Madame Blanc that her anxieties would be over. I was the sentimental one, they all said, the only one who made any fuss about a step which was everything that could be desired.



"YOU THERE, CHILD!" SHE CRIED OUT.

to happen. The chief thing was her aunt's desire to marry her, of which Elisabeth spoke freely.

"Why should she wish to marry me so early?" the girl said. "I am only eighteen. I hope it is not wrong, Miss Louise, but it pleases me not at all to be married. Is not that the right way? Is it thus, then? I do not like at all to marry me. No! But how, then, must I say it?"

"You must say I don't want to be married, Elisabeth."

"Yes. I do not want to marry me, mademoiselle. You are not married, nor Mademoiselle Frances. Why should I be? But Aunt Theodosie thinks of this more than anything. She will not hear me speak. She has had several parties proposed to her, and she will not rest till she has settled upon some one. There is the *dot* to be considered, and many things. I hope it will be a long time before she ever makes up her mind."

"And are not you to be consulted, Elisabeth?"

"I—, but you know, Miss Louise, we are never consulted. Oh, yes, they will say to me, 'Are thou content, *petite*?' but if I said 'No, *ma tante*, I am not content,' there would only come another, and all the trouble to begin again. Besides that Aunt Theodosie would cry and upbraid me that I am ungrateful. But I shall hate the man," she cried, with an energy that brought the colour to her cheeks.

"But, Elisabeth! you must not marry a man unless you love him, indeed you must not. You are English, and in England they would never let you do it. Why, it is a sin!"

CHAPTER IV.

I KNEW very well that trouble would come, but I did not know—how could anyone divine!—the quarter from which it would come.

We were all in the garden, as we generally were, when the first scene of the catastrophe took place. There had been a considerable commotion in the afternoon—a new arrival at the Maison Blanc, but not new people in one sense of the word. I saw them from the window driving up the road in a fly from Vevay, with some very dusty luggage, a red-faced Englishwoman, large and fat, with a pale, silky-looking girl beside her: not in the least an agreeable pair to look at, but English—English from the tip of their shoes to the top of the feathers in their hats. The elder of them kept looking out around her at everything she saw, as though she were comparing it in her mind with something she remembered. When one travels a great deal abroad one soon learns not to wonder at the very strange people who turn up—people of whom you cannot imagine what in the world they are doing there. But the appearance of this dusty cab with these dusty people forced the idea upon one's mind. The older woman looked like a cook—I am sure I beg my cook's pardon, who is a handsome woman, and dresses better than I do, for such a comparison. She was like the conventional cook, with a red face and a rusty black gown, and her headgear a trifle awry. The girl with her was delicate, anemic, silky-looking, but that might be because, poor thing, she was not well. She was very common too, not a feature nor a movement in her which had the least grace or interest. At the same time it could not be denied that they were English of the English, not to be mistaken for a moment. Elisabeth stood by me at the window as I looked out upon these new people.

"Here are two who don't make us proud of our country," I said.

"Are they English? Are you sure they are English?" said Elisabeth. She smiled a little as she looked down upon them. "They may be good, Miss Louise, though they are not pretty. And they are coming here. But Aunt Theodosia will not take them in. I will go and tell them that this is not an hotel where anybody can come."

"Yes, go, Elisabeth, for I am sure they speak nothing but English, from their looks, and the girl seems ill," I said.

I heard her soft voice presently in colloquy with them below, explaining that unless they had written to order rooms Madame Blanc did not receive strangers whom she did not know. And then the big woman spoke in cumbersome, ugly French. I disliked her from the first, everything about her, and the sound of her horrid voice. She pushed Elisabeth away, talking loudly.

"Je suis-une parent," she said. "Qu'elle vienne. Go away; I want no English to meddle. Je demande Madame Blanc. Qu'elle vienne. Je suis sa belle sœur, et m'appelle Madame George."

I cannot say that I at all realized what was coming when I heard those words, but I had an instinct that something terrible was coming. I turned round from the window and ran as fast as my feet would carry me to where my mother was sitting in our room at the other side of the house.

"Mamma, I said—'mamma! someone has arrived who says she is a parent of Madame Blanc, and that her name is Madame George.'"

"What, child?" said my mother, with a great cry.

I repeated my message, breathless, feeling more and more that it was something terrible.

"She says she is a parent, and that her name is Madame George. What does it mean? Does it mean something about Elisabeth?" I said.

I have never seen mamma more excited. She got up to rush downstairs and see what was going on. Then she wrung her hands and said that of course we had nothing to do with it whatever happened. And then she cried out, "Madame George! Madame George! Oh, Louise, don't you think you are mistaken—don't you think you must be mistaken?" as if I could change it all by saying something different. But she said truly that of course we had no business to interfere—it was not our place to interfere.

"What will happen to Elisabeth?" I asked almost in a whisper, creeping close to my mother's side.

"Oh, don't be so silly, Louise. What could happen to Elisabeth? She will only find out what she must have found out in the end," said my sister Frances, trying to hide her feelings, though she was just as anxious as any of us. But of course for some time we were obliged to keep still and ask each other what could be happening. It was not our place to interfere. When Leocadie came to ask us if she should carry us our tea as usual into the garden she looked a little excited, we all thought.

"I hear there are some new people arrived, Leocadie," said my mother.

"Oh, no," Leocadie said; "no new people, only a parent of Madame Blanc's."

We were glad to go down into the garden, where we were all in the habit of meeting at this hour, and it was there that we saw the great scene.

The two women who had arrived were standing out on the terrace before the house, the red-faced Englishwoman rather than ever, with her handkerchiefs untied, fanning herself with her handkerchief, and her sallow daughter by her side. Never any Englishwomen don't gesticulate when they are excited. Her arms were waving about like the limbs of a windmill. Sometimes she mopped her face with her huge white handkerchief; sometimes fanned herself with it; sometimes she waved it like a flag of distress. Madame Blanc stood beside them, trying with laborious English to draw the stranger into that language which she disdained.



"SHE USED TO COME TO ME EVERY DAY."

discussing loudly in her bad French. Old Madame Dupin, Bonne Maman, was seated on her usual seat, knitting her usual stocking with unconscious mechanical fingers, looked confused and helpless at the group before her. Madame Dupin was a little deaf, as a grandmother has a right to be, and her processes of thought were slow, and she was frightened with the hubbub.

"What does she want? What does she mean? What are they saying?" the old lady cried.

"I am your son's wife—I am Madame George," said the red-faced woman. I will not give her bad French, lest the reader should think I know no better. But she insisted upon speaking it, though it would have been such a relief to Madame Blanc had she spoken English. "I have lived in my own country and I have not troubled you. But now I am told there is someone here who gives herself out to be my child, and is to have my girl's share of the money. I did not pay any attention till I heard of the money. But I won't have my girl wronged, not for anyone else. Grandmother, this is George's child—this girl here, who is as like him as two peas. I address myself to you, for you ought to have some feeling. As for Theodosie, it shall never be said that I let her get the better of me. Bonne Maman, this is your little daughter, not the other. Child go and give your grandmother a kiss. It is this one that is Elisabeth Dupin, if there was not another in the world."

"Theodosie," said old Bonne Maman, "what is this lady saying? She speaks very strange, and I don't understand what she says."

"Never mind, mother," said Madame Blanc. "You are making a great mistake," she added in English to the stranger; "there is no wrong to your daughter. If you will come with me into my room you shall be told everything. There is no wrong done."

"I never heard," said Madame George, "never yet, that the wretched fellow was fleeing the land. I'll not go into any private room. Elisabeth, my dear, give your Bonne Maman a kiss, and let her see you. Say what I told you. You may not know much French, but at least you can say what you know."

The sallow girl went up to Madame Dupin and cast her arms about her neck.

"Oh, Bonne Maman, it's me qui aime Elisabeth!" she said.

The old lady drew herself up, and pushed the girl away.

"Elisabeth, Elisabeth," she cried, putting out her hand behind her to lay hold upon the true Elisabeth, whom she loved.

Elisabeth stood beside her grandmother, with a face from which all the blood seemed to have ebbed away. She was never high coloured at any time.

now she was as white as the handkerchief she held in her hand, and which she put up now and then, without knowing what she did, to her dry and parched lips. I don't think she had yet realised what it all meant; only that in her whole being there had arisen a chill and terror like death.

"Madame Dupin," cried the woman who called herself Madame George, "rouse yourself up; don't be cheated any more. This is Elisabeth, George's daughter, that has never been away from me, her mother, since she was born. Those that have put another in her place, to come in for a share of George's money and yours, they can tell you who she is; I can't tell who she is, but she is not his daughter. This—is this the daughter of George; here's my Elisabeth. Run in, run in, you little fool," the mother whispered in English, "and give her a good kiss, and don't be dazed."

The sallow-faced girl did not seem to like at all the rôle pointed out to her, but she acquiesced in it with an anxious yet conscientious endeavour. She came forward again, and placed herself by the grandmother's side. She, with a little flush upon her face, and Elisabeth as pale as death, stood almost facing each other. The newcomer had the square set figure and solid limbs of a girl from the Oberland; her hair was dark, and her complexion thick, like so many of her race. Poor little Elisabeth, with her slim form, her fairness, her paleness, the light hair upon her milk-white forehead, the infantile softness of her look, was of another blood. They were like types of their respective countries, though the little English girl had never been out of Switzerland or the Swiss maiden out of England before.

"Theodosie," cried the old lady, "why do you leave me to support this agitation! My son's wife, I have always heard, died. Ah, I did not care perhaps so much what happened to her; and Elisabeth—Elisabeth, she has been with you since ever she was born!"

"No," said the other Elisabeth. "Granny, I have been in England all my life; I have often wanted to come, but mother wouldn't. It's me that's Elisabeth. She spoke in English, it is true. The old lady gave her a troubled glance.

"Elisabeth, Elisabeth!" she cried. She took hold roughly, being only an old peasant woman, and in great agitation, of Elisabeth's arm, and pulled her forward. The two girls stood together, side by side. They were about the same age. The one was flushed and confident in her certain right; the other, rigid, terror-stricken, and pale as if she had received her death-blow.

"Theodosie, Theodosie!" cried old Madame Dupin. She looked from one to another, and began to sob and cry. She held Elisabeth fast with a despairing clutch, as if she feared to have her carried off from her; but her eyes went back again and again to the face of the other girl. We who were spectators divined that it was the face of her son George that the old lady saw.

"Well!" said Madame Blanc, defiant; "and if it is so, what then? I never set eyes on this woman before. She may be my brother George's wife or no; I know not. The girl may be his daughter. She has a look of George; he was always as sallow as wax. Did I ever say Elisabeth was George's child? No. It was said so, and I let them say. Whether she is George's child, whether she is not, she is our Elisabeth, the child of the house. My little one, come here to me. They may all forsake thee, but I will not forsake thee. Money! she has had none of George's money; George had no money! Those who come here in search of money may find themselves the most mistaken of all. My little one, come thou here to me."

Elisabeth stood and looked round her, looking at all of us with her small young face drawn and haggard. She did not move, and indeed the old grandmother held her fast so that she could not. She turned her eyes upon Madame Blanc with a despairing look. "Madame," she cried—"aunt, oh tell me who I am! Have I nothing to do with anybody? do I not belong to anyone? Oh!" cried the girl, with a bitter cry, "who am I—who am I, if I am not Elisabeth any more?"

Then we all got up feeling that we could bear it no longer; and it was my mother who took Elisabeth away. We took her up into our own room, and mamma was shut up with her for a long time telling her how it was, while in the meantime a dreadful trouble and commotion were going on in the house. We could hear Madame Blanc and Madame George talking over

the body, so to speak, of the old lady. It was she to whom they both addressed themselves, until they drove her into a sort of nervous fainting fit, and then there was a temporary cessation of the sound.

Elisabeth did not come out of the sitting-room for about an hour and a half. We girls were clustered round one of the windows in the corridor, and we all looked round eagerly when she came out. She gave us a faint little smile as she passed. She was terribly agitated, and yet calm. The circles of her eyes looked enlarged, and her nostril was quivering and dilated. She looked so much beyond the power of speech that we all respected her trouble, and 'd not attempt to detain her. She passed along the corridor quickly with her firm short step. Before she was out of sight she was met by Leontie, who was not so respectful as we were. She stopped to seize the girl in her arms, and cry over her.

"But never mind, never mind," cried Leontie. "M. Jaquet will be faithful whatever happens. He will not give thee up, *chérie*, thou and thy good dot, not for anything that may be said; thy marriage will not be broken, *petite*. And after all that is what is of most consequence. Elisabeth, Elisabeth, you must keep up your heart."



"THERE IS ALWAYS A LAKE AT THE BOTTOM OF THE GARDEN."

Elisabeth did not answer a word to what the woman said. She drew herself out of Leontie's arms almost by force, and hurried away.

My mother came out to the door to call us in. She was pale too, and looked as if she had been crying.

"I have had a great trial to go through," she said. "Poor little Elisabeth; I thought her heart would have broken; I do not know if she will get over it. Oh, what a cruel thing of that dreadful woman to burst in like this and spoil the girl's life."

"But perhaps, mamma," said Frances, who was always reasonable, "she thought it was her duty to look after her child's rights."

"And Leontie says the marriage will not be broken," said Rosa, who now, of course, knew all about it, like everybody else.

"You see now, Louisa," said my mother, "how wise Madame Blanc was to be so urgent about the marriage. I wish with all my heart it had taken place a week ago, as was first proposed. Of course the marriage will not be broken. Old M. Jaquet knows all the story more than anyone else does; and of course it is all right about the dot."

We saw no more of Elisabeth that night. She had shut herself into her own room, and would not open to anyone. I went up to try if she would see me, but I could not get her to open the door. "To-morrow," she said—"to-morrow," but that was all. Her voice was muffled and painful to hear, not like hers at all. She was hoarse with crying all by herself, up in her garret. Oh, poor little Elisabeth! I was glad she had not come down, when I saw old Madame Dupin walking in the garden that evening, leaning upon the sallow-faced girl and chatting to her. The girl knew no French and the grandmother no English, but the old lady was as pleased as if she had got a new toy. "Thou art like thy poor father; my little Elisabeth was very nice, but she was not at all like her papa," Madame Dupin was saying. Her old mind had got confused between them. She thought they were both of them children of her son George.

There was something in the air that night which made me sleepless and restless. I could not keep still; and every time I woke, which was about a hundred times, my first thought was Elisabeth. Poor little Elisabeth; what a waking here would be! I hoped she had slept after all the excitement of the evening; but when she woke and remembered! They were all very early risers at the Maison Blanc. I thought it likely that she would wake up early, earlier even than usual. It was only about four o'clock when I woke that morning for good, and felt that I should not sleep any more, however much I might try. I got up and put on a dressing-gown and slipped upstairs through the quiet house to Elisabeth's door. I knocked, but there was no answer. I was afraid of knocking too loudly, lest it might wake the house. I had tapped three or four times without any reply, when it suddenly appeared to me that the door was not quite shut. I pushed it quietly open. Elisabeth was not there.

At four o'clock there was still no stir in the house. I believe somebody was up in the kitchen even at that hour, but why should Elisabeth be so early? I tried to satisfy myself that perhaps like myself she could not sleep. I went back to my room and took my hat and a clock to throw over my dressing-gown before I went downstairs. There was nobody astir except the old woman in the kitchen lighting the fire. They had to be lighted very early for all the hot water that was wanted in the morning in that populous house. I asked the old woman if she had seen Elisabeth, and she laughed in my face. "In bed," she said, pointing upstairs. But then I knew that she was not in bed.

I went out into the garden with a very nervous feeling. Perhaps she had been sitting out there catching cold in her favourite seat at the corner. But she was not there. It was a misty gray morning veiled in mist. You could scarcely see the hills on the Savoy side; the water had a grey withering look, lying in long silvery lines with bands of shadow; no high lights or sunshiny, only gradations of grey. How still the world is so early in the morning. It is like a great desert



"A YOUNG MR. JAQUET."



unpopulated plain, or as if everybody had died and departed in the night, and you were left alone. It seemed impossible that everybody should wake and wait breakfast, and begin again the routine of a common day. I went out half-frightened beyond the garden wall, and out to the little pier which was at the side of the house. I don't know why I should have gone there. She was not a girl to go out in a boat all alone in the quiet stillness. She would have been frightened at any time to go out alone in a boat.

Before I went to the pier I stopped and looked all round me up and down, on the Vevay road, and the mountain road, and the road that led to the village. There was not a single living creature visible. The world seemed empty save for myself. As for Elisabeth, not a sign, not so much as a little footprint in the dust. I felt in a kind of dream, looking for her, and as if I must always go looking for her and never find her.

"Elisabeth! Elisabeth!" I cried. And then I grew more frightened still at the sound of my own voice, which seemed the only sound in all that silent world.

Then I went down the steps to where the boats lay. It was only then that I remembered what she had said about the lake; but it did not disturb me even now, for people in Switzerland have a mania for that sort of dreadful talk. It seemed to me, however, that if I could get to the furthest out of these boats I might be able to see up and down the lake if there was any that could have taken her away. I managed to do this after a while, clambering out of one boat into another. But before I looked out upon the great sheet of the lake something drew my eyes to the pale water that lay under the bow of the little skiff in which I was.

And there I found Elisabeth.

Her heart had broken when she found that she belonged to nobody, was nothing to anyone. Had she been married perhaps it would not have happened. But her trouble and her shame, and the great and awful loneliness was more than she could bear. And it is a fatal thing, as I have often found out since, when your heart is broken and your life cut off, to have a quiet lake, so silent and so smiling, just outside your door.



THE END